

Chapter 1

Breaking Down the Basics of Living Wheat-Free

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing the origins and problems of a wheat-heavy diet
 - ▶ Examining how wheat-free eating differs from conventional diet wisdom
 - ▶ Making the change and keeping an eye on the results
 - ▶ Getting started now
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Imagine a world where diabetes, cancer, heart disease, dementia, and Alzheimer's are confined to a fairly small segment of the population. In this scenario, you know maybe one distant family member who suffers from or has died from one of these diseases. Being overweight or obese makes a person an outlier — definitely not the norm.



As fictitious as this world may sound, it was real. Those who grew up prior to the 1960s can usually confirm it. Ask someone from that generation whether he knew anyone back in the day who was overweight, and he can probably name one specific individual. That's how uncommon the condition was.

Unfortunately, the generations that grew up from the 1960s through the present day can be considered guinea pigs in a grand high-carbohydrate, low-fat experiment. Through the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, some misguided science and the resulting governmental guidelines recommended increasing consumption of wheat and grains of all kinds. Fat-free foods loaded with sugar became acceptable for a time, and vegetable oils were encouraged to replace animal fat. All in the name of eliminating fat, especially saturated fat.

To see how those recommendations have turned out, all you have to do is look around you. Chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, dementia, and Alzheimer's are out of control with no end in sight. These diseases are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States.

Currently, 45 percent of the U.S. population has at least one chronic disease, and 26 percent has multiple chronic conditions. Chronic diseases account for over 80 percent of hospital admissions, over 90 percent of all prescriptions filled, and over 75 percent of all physician visits.

Our goal is to help you to take control of your health and your future, regardless of what current conventional wisdom has to say. Eliminating wheat and other grains, sugar, and vegetable oils will give you the foundation needed to reduce your risk for diseases normally associated with “getting older.” From there, you can tweak and modify your diet to fit your lifestyle and needs.



Throughout this book, we talk about the detrimental effects of wheat and other grains. Wheat does seem to cause the most sensitivity for most people, for many reasons we cover in other chapters. With that said, we advise eliminating all grains because of the similarity in their structures. Other grains may not have quite the effect that wheat has, but they still can elicit a response that's not conducive to good health.

How Did We Get into This Wheat Mess? A Brief History

Here's a quick quiz for you: what do George Washington, Ancel Keys, and George McGovern have in common? The answer is wheat.

Each of these men left a lasting legacy with regards to growing, eating, and recommending wheat. George Washington actually perfected growing wheat to take advantage of a shortage in Europe. U.S. exports of wheat totaled in the millions as far back as 1860, setting the stage over the next 150 years for the development of denser wheat plants and denser fields of wheat.

Ancel Keys was an American scientist known early in his career for inventing *K-rations*, the prepared boxes of food the military used in World War II. Ultimately, however, he became better known as the man who started the United States on a path to lowfat eating. His highly controversial beliefs in the 1960s and '70s gained traction thanks to his political connections and convinced many to throw out the butter for a tiny bit of margarine and to up carbohydrate intake (including grains).

The last piece of the wheat puzzle involved the government, specifically Senator George McGovern. In 1977, he released “Dietary Goals for the United States,” which encouraged a high-carbohydrate diet (grains and sugar) and a decrease in dietary fat. The recommendations have been tweaked since then,

but they essentially remain the same. The ramifications for telling an entire country how to eat can be enormous, especially if the recommendations are wrong. The United States has seen a steady decline in the health of its population since McGovern's guidelines as the prevalence of chronic diseases including heart disease, diabetes, dementia, and Alzheimer's has increased. For a fuller history of wheat's rise to domination, flip to Chapter 2.

Surveying the Health Effects of Wheat and Gluten

"Healthy whole grains" are everywhere. Manufacturers are quick to slap that label across the front of a box regardless of what else is in the product in hopes of convincing consumers that that food choice is healthy. But that conclusion couldn't be further from the truth.

Another buzzword: gluten-free. Wheat and gluten currently are in the public eye more than they've ever been before. Science has revealed that they're responsible for maladies ranging from simple annoying allergies to more-severe conditions such as autoimmune diseases. Knowing the difference between wheat and gluten and where your sensitivities lie is critical as you change your diet.

In the following sections, we overview the true health cost of eating wheat and take a quick look at the wheat/gluten issue.

Glimpsing what wheat does to the body

You hear about the nutrients in grains and the all-important fiber content, but if you look closely, you can see these claims are a bit skewed. Milling and processing reduces many of the nutrients, and the plant's own defenses limit your body's ability to access the remaining nutrients. And grains' insoluble fiber speeds things along the intestinal tract, making the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins more challenging. This scenario is especially important in low-fat, high-fiber diets.

Wheat's impact on blood sugar is shockingly huge. Many people think that to become diabetic, a person must overindulge in sweets and be overweight. It's simply not true. The food recommended by health experts has more of an impact on blood sugar than the candy at the checkout line. Sometimes we wonder whether doctors are even aware of wheat's blood glucose impact. If they were, we think there would be more of a pushback against conventional

wisdom. Researchers are discovering blood sugar to be a major long term indicator of all sorts of disease. The consequences of chronically elevated blood glucose lead to gut and brain dysfunction.

Eating wheat may lead to a condition known as *leaky gut syndrome* and what can be called leaky brain syndrome. (See Chapter 4.) Both of these situations result from staples in many people's lives. Stress, wheat and grains, refined carbs, processed foods, antibiotics, NSAIDS, and lack of sleep all contribute to foreign items entering the bloodstream through the gut. When the foreign invaders go where they shouldn't, conditions such as asthma, migraines, arthritis, and depression can follow. These same causes lead to unwanted intruders crossing the blood-brain barrier, which can lead to dementia and Alzheimer's. Until recently, science didn't know the mechanism or testing procedures to determine the extent of this kind of invasion. The picture is quickly unfolding and opening up a whole new understanding of inflammation and its role in autoimmune disease.

With a wheat-free lifestyle, you'll be on your way to healing these possible breaches in your system. In addition, one of the many byproducts of these changes is a reduction in risk for metabolic syndrome, a leading indicator of heart disease (as we discuss in Chapter 4).

When you choose to go completely grain-free, you not only improve your health but also realize how poorly you felt when you were eating a grain-filled diet. Yes, going just wheat-free can help relieve any conditions associated with your past diet. But consider the recommendation to eliminate all grains with this analogy: Someone who has an alcohol problem would never be advised to eliminate only hard liquor but to continue drinking beer. This plan of attack doesn't fix the whole problem.

Differentiating between wheat and gluten

Wheat and other grains contain a protein called *gluten*, which contributes flavor and binding qualities to food, household products, and even toys. One important sub-protein of gluten is *gliadin*. Gliadin causes inflammation and is the initiator of leaky gut in the small intestine. Many people have some sort of sensitivity to gluten, whether it's a little bloating after meals or a complete intolerance (celiac disease). Chapter 3 goes into more detail about the relationship between wheat and gluten and the effects on the body.

The only known cure for gluten-related illnesses is eliminating gluten from the diet, which means eliminating wheat. So going gluten-free means you're automatically wheat-free, but you can be wheat-free without giving up all gluten if you choose. In Chapter 7, you can find lists of foods to throw out of your wheat-free kitchen, including some that include wheat hiding behind sneaky aliases.

Heather's testimonial: Cutting out wheat to cope with chronic disease

The idea of giving up something as fundamental as wheat would've never crossed my mind until my doctor recommended it in 2009. After months of feeling sluggish and experiencing muscle pain, joint aches, and a host of other symptoms, my doctor looked at my most recent blood work and said, "I want you to go three months gluten-free." Having followed her advice, I walked into that three-month follow-up appointment feeling noticeably better. Although I still had symptoms, they weren't as severe. I never expected that she'd tell me I had Sjogren's syndrome and give me prescriptions for six different medications.

After the diagnosis, I fell off the gluten-free wagon. I was too focused on trying to remember to take all my pills at all the right times. Like most patients who receive a diagnosis they're unfamiliar with, I spent a lot of time on the Internet, and I came across

some recommendations about a completely wheat-free diet, which were further reinforced by a friend. I decided to try again, simply removing all gluten-containing products at first and later most refined carbohydrates, sugars, and processed vegetable oils.

It took about three months before I really started to feel the change. My rheumatologist told me that I was in remission; he was amazed at the progress I was making in such a short time. I finally convinced him to lower my medication dosages; within the span of a year, I was able to go from six medications to two, one of which I take only as-needed. I'm feeling better than I've ever felt; I'm not just surviving with Sjogren's but thriving with it. I never thought I'd see the day where wheat wasn't part of my life, but I can't argue with the way I feel. This has been one of the best decisions I've ever made, and I only wish I'd made it sooner.

Comparing a Wheat-Free Lifestyle to Other Diets

At some point in time, you or someone you know begins the daunting task of losing weight in order to look and feel better, or for better health. For most, this process means restricting calories to the point of starvation. Yes, you guessed it: the dreaded diet. At first, you're highly motivated to lose those unwanted pounds. But as time passes and you continue to deny your hunger, the motivation fades. That's why so many diets are difficult to follow. Your body's energy demands begin to outweigh the amount of calories your diet of choice allows. Your constant hunger challenges your desire to lose

weight and your resolve to stick to your diet, so you experience weakness and a slowed metabolism. You lose your self-control, you give in, and it's adios, diet. Often, you end up gaining more weight and become even more unhealthy than you were before you started.



Having a greater understanding of how wheat, sugar, and vegetable oils affect your weight and health is essential in choosing or developing a diet that will make everyone around you envious. Applying that information to your diet gives you the structure needed to stay the course of good health. Head to Chapter 3 for the specifics.

Many philosophies and diets surrounding food contradict the wheat-, sugar-, and vegetable oil-free lifestyle that's necessary to ensure good health. Understanding the truths behind the more controversial dietary information — such as the idea that red meat is unhealthy, that consumption of fat and cholesterol should be minimized, and that you just have to burn off more calories than you take in — can help you gain confidence in your diet. And confidence is what you need when so many incorrect, mixed messages are swirling around you in every direction.

Mainstream diets can be effective in that they provide a structure with their eating plans. That's not to say that all diets suggest eating healthy foods, however. Quite the contrary. As a general rule, diets restrict calories because of a belief that the less you eat, the less you weigh. The first step to eating less for most plans is reducing the amount of fat. Typically, though, the fat is replaced by wheat-filled offerings.

In Chapter 6, we break down several dietary approaches to see how eliminating wheat and other grains, sugar, and vegetable oils fits into each.

Understanding Lasting Change

Putting a plan into action has its challenges, especially when it involves creating new, healthy routines and dropping old, unhealthy ones such as comfort eating. But, no matter how tough it gets, all these obstacles are greatly overshadowed by the change's benefits.



Success at eliminating wheat and sugar from your diet for good and beginning an exercise program that lasts involves more than just a fleeting thought. It requires determination. When you commit to a new behavior, design a wellness vision, set well-written goals, and have an accountability buddy on board, you create an environment that breeds success. Having a sound understanding of the behavior you're changing will move you to action.

Embracing the tools for change

If you're like most people, at some point you've probably started a new healthy behavior with the best of intentions, only to hit one of life's bumps in the road and end up back at square one. Change can be difficult and is seldom comfortable.

So what's the answer to making a change that lasts? By identifying what's most important to you right now and focusing on that motivation, you set yourself up for big-time success. That one thing that's most important to you — whether it's losing weight, looking great for a special occasion, or improving your health — must evoke an emotional response to keep you committed to reaching your vision.

A few tools can really support your change:

- ✓ **Stages of Change model:** The *Stages of Change model* helps you identify where you are in the change process and provides techniques to assist you in moving toward lasting change. When you see yourself in a particular stage, structuring your goals accordingly becomes much easier. (Chapter 5 gives you the lowdown on the Stages of Change model.)
- ✓ **SMART goals and a wellness vision:** Most people set goals flippantly, only to see them fade after a short time. When you set SMART goals, you're much more likely to see your goals through to the end. (SMART is an acronym for specific, measurable, action-based, realistic, and timely.) Writing a wellness vision and setting wellness goals is a way of taking action for your health, not allowing life to just happen to you. You become more focused, motivated, and attentive to the things in life that matter most to you. In Chapter 5, we provide a detailed description on how to write a wellness vision and set SMART goals for your wheat-free lifestyle.
- ✓ **An accountability buddy:** Finding an accountability buddy has an enormous influence on your commitment to your goals. Making a drastic lifestyle change comes with challenges, whether that's feeling like you need a sugar fix or being tempted to fall back into old routines. An accountability buddy — whether it's your spouse, a family member, a friend, or a coworker — looks out for you and holds your feet to the fire when you can't do it on your own.

Exercising your way to the top of the health charts

Have you ever heard the saying “No train, no gain?” Probably not, because we just made it up. But it speaks to the truth that is found in exercise. As an essential piece to the overall health and well-being puzzle, exercise

strengthens the heart, lungs, muscles, bones, and joints. In fact, few systems in the body *aren't* enhanced, strengthened, or improved in some way by exercise.

Exercise has the power not only to improve your health but also to enrich your life and increase your well-being. When you exercise, your thinking, mood, energy, and confidence are all affected for the better. Exercise also helps keep the stress hormone (cortisol) at bay, which aids in stress reduction.



As you age, you become more insulin-resistant to the foods you eat. Exercise allows your cells to be more sensitive to insulin, which decreases your chances of becoming insulin-resistant even as you age. This shift reduces your risk of a whole host of diseases, including Type 2 diabetes.

When you're ready to add exercise to your wheat-free lifestyle, refer to Chapter 16. There, you can find everything you need to start and sustain a program that meets your health needs.

Keeping Your Cool in Special Situations

After you gather all the information you need to get started on your wheat- and grain-free adventure, you can apply it to your daily routine. But sometimes situations pop up that challenge your new lifestyle. For example, dining out can make you feel like you've lost control. The following sections introduce some situations where you may have to put a little more thought into eating wheat-free.

Eating away from home

Even though specific challenges arise when you're eating out, keeping your focus on your commitment to good health can help you weather the storm. The evolution of restaurants to meet the needs of patrons with food sensitivities has grown tremendously since 2000. Restaurants are increasingly offering gluten-free menus and are often more receptive to special ordering (at least in mainstream places). However, the cost of providing items such as grass-fed beef, organic chicken and produce, and wild-caught fish is still prohibitive for a lot of restaurants. If all else fails, just shoot for the best possible alternative so you can focus on enjoying gatherings with family and friends.



Know what restaurants and international cuisines suit your wheat-free lifestyle. Doing so prevents you from showing up at a restaurant and being disappointed by the menu. Although they're not known for their contributions to good health, even some fast food restaurants offer gluten-free items on their menu, so do some research.

If you don't know what ingredients are in a dish, ask. By doing your homework before you get to the restaurant, you can better enjoy those you're dining with. But if you don't have the opportunity to check things out ahead of time — maybe the restaurant was a last-minute choice — don't be shy. Speak to the chef and the manager and tell them what your needs are. Chapter 14 spells out specific questions to ask the restaurant staff to ensure a wheat-free experience.

In due time, you're sure to face the challenge of staying wheat-free while traveling, which requires some careful planning on your part. Having a clear understanding of your trip's itinerary will help determine whether you can grocery shop before or while you're on the trip and what kinds of restaurants and hotel food you'll have access to. You can find tips on planning your diet while traveling in Chapter 14.

Developing an eating plan of action for special occasions

Outlasting the holidays or a special occasion on a wheat-free diet can seem like pure drudgery. With all the foods you no longer eat easily within your reach, you must draw upon your new energy and good health to pull you through. Even the most well-intentioned wheat-avoiders face the challenges of how to eat healthfully when special occasions arise. That's why you need to think ahead about how (and how much) you're going to stick to your guns when celebrations come calling.



The pressures to give in and the inconvenience of having an alternate plan can be overwhelming. As we note in Chapter 15, some people can fudge a little during the holidays or a family gathering without going completely off the dietary rails. If that's you, just be sure to keep a tight rein on your minor indulgences so they don't become a full-fledged backslide.



If you prefer to follow a stricter wheat-free plan (or you must because of a condition such as celiac disease), you can help your cause by establishing strategies such as bringing a wheat-free dish or two, eating the healthiest wheat-free foods first, or hosting the celebration yourself.

Take care when alcohol enters the gathering. Overindulging can cloud your thinking and inhibit your decision-making process when it comes to food consumption.

Business dinners and work functions can be just as difficult to remain wheat-free at, whether it's a corporate seminar or an office baby shower. Making your needs known to the person in charge of planning the meal is critical, as we explain in Chapter 15.



When you eliminate wheat and other grains, sugar, and vegetable oils from your diet, you experience weight loss, feel an increase in energy, and see an improvement in your general health. So much so that you'll probably want to tell the whole world about it. But be sensitive to the fact that some people are skeptical or downright unaccepting of the wheat-free lifestyle. In Chapter 15, we give you advice on spreading the word and answering your critics without force-feeding your message.

Monitoring and Enhancing Your Progress

Some effects of a wheat- and sugar-free diet, such as weight loss and a general feeling of well-being, are pretty noticeable. But how do you know whether your blood sugar or cholesterol numbers have improved? The only way to measure these kinds of markers is to have them tested medically. The following sections preview the benefits of testing and consider a couple of supplements that may help further your improvement.

Checking your progress with basic tests

Buying into the science of a wheat- or grain-free diet and implementing the program are the two toughest obstacles to becoming wheat-free. Identifying yourself as someone who chooses not to eat wheat or sugar is part of that process as well. After a few months of your new lifestyle, the results will start rolling in. As you waltz into the doctor's office to hear the positive results of your blood tests, odds are he'll ask you what type of lowfat diet you're on. Watch his surprised reaction when you tell him you're eating a lower-carb, high-fat diet.

The lipid panel is a common medical test, and its results help you see how your health is improving on a wheat- or grain-free diet. This blood test measures overall cholesterol, LDL (low density lipoproteins), HDL (high density lipoproteins), and triglycerides. Conventional wisdom holds that certain numbers should be high, and other numbers should be low (we get into the specifics in Chapter 17). However, you really need to pay attention to two numbers as they relate to each other. Of all the numbers in the basic lipid panel, the triglyceride-to-HDL ratio gives you the most accurate look at your risk of developing heart disease. And how do you get that ratio to desirable levels? With a wheat/grain-free lifestyle.

Other medical tests that can give you a clear view of your overall health include C-reactive protein, fibrinogen, Lp(a), homocysteine, hemoglobin A1C, and iron. Head to Chapter 17 for more about these tests.

Adding some extras to ensure your progress

Despite what many people want to believe, taking a pill of any kind won't solve your problems. The same is true for taking a supplement or vitamin. In no way are these items a substitute for eating a healthy wheat-free, sugar-free diet. However, they may help you achieve your goals in conjunction with your lifestyle change.

The two most important supplements are fish oil and cod liver oil. *Fish oil* is derived from the tissues of oily fish; salmon, sardines, herring, anchovies, and mackerel have some of the highest ratios of omega-3 fatty acids to omega-6 fatty acids. The desirable ratio shouldn't exceed 4:1 (and ideally, 1:1). Most Americans are closer to 20:1 omega-6 to omega-3. This type of ratio leads to inflammation, which in turn leads to myriad diseases. (You can read more about fatty acid ratios in Chapter 18.)

Cod liver oil, on the other hand, is derived from — you guessed it — the liver of cod fish. Cod liver oil doesn't contain as much of the beneficial omega-3 fatty acids as fish oil does, but it has ample amounts of the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, and K2, which contribute to vital body functions.

Going Wheat-Free: A Quick-Start Guide

Throughout the course of this book, we provide detailed information about how and why you want to go wheat-free. To whet your wheat-free appetite, here's an abridged version of how to accomplish your goal right now.

1. Clean out your kitchen.

Your refrigerator, freezer, and pantry must be void of wheat, added sugar, and vegetable oils so you have no temptations to your new way of life. (While you're at it, we suggest chucking out all grain products entirely.) Why risk getting derailed? Check out Chapter 7 for tips on accomplishing this task.

2. Head to the grocery store to restock the kitchen.

Your items are going to come from the perimeter of the store, where the fresh fruits, veggies, meats, and dairy reside. A few essentials we recommend you always have on hand are pasture-raised eggs, coconut oil, grass-fed beef, dark leafy greens, and an assortment of organic berries.



You may also want to buy an assortment of nuts, cheeses, raw veggies, dark chocolate, and Greek yogurt to have on hand for snacks. Your snacking needs go way down from your norm when you're wheat-free, but sometimes it's nice to nosh a little. For a complete list of wheat-free go-tos, refer to Chapter 7; for our top ten, hit Chapter 20.

Before you head to the store, look over the recipes in Chapters 8 through 13 for some menu ideas. Use the ingredient lists to make a shopping list.

3. Optional: Get the tests listed in Chapter 17, such as a basic lipid panel.

Sometimes getting a lipid panel is as easy as walking into your local drugstore. Although it's not necessary, it's a good way to get a baseline for your health markers so you can track your progress.

4. Start thinking about your exercise plan as outlined in Chapter 16.

Make a trip to the nearest gym or head to a fitness equipment store if you plan to work out at home. Exercise is an integral part of your success, so don't delay.

We're basically recommending going back to a low-to-no-grain, low-sugar, high-fat diet that was far more common more than 50 years ago. Just return to the habits that were once prevalent, where real food was the norm and very few people ate anything out of a box or from a drive-through window.

Transitioning to a wheat-free lifestyle isn't easy. We know that. Though we encourage going cold turkey, we know everyone has missteps along the way. It's a process that evolves over time as you get more and more comfortable with what you can and can't eat — or rather, choose to eat and not eat.